

news from the

# Department of Community and Human Services

alexandria community services board



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## Helping Foster Kids Connect to Family

Twenty year-old Kevin (a fictitious name) graduated high school and was preparing to enter the armed forces. About to age out of foster care, where he lived since age nine, Kevin was curious to know more about his birth mother. Although it was emotional for him, Kevin pursued research of his mother with his case worker, who referred him to social worker and Family Finder Emery Jefferies.

Family Finding is the newest component of the Family Engagement Program, a multi-faceted approach to assisting families with various issues in order to prevent removal of children from their homes. However, sometimes kids go into foster care for their safety and well-being where they may remain until young adulthood. In such cases, Family Finding can provide the foster children with family and community connections outside the child welfare system.

“The day that I found her (Kevin’s mother) was a great victory because so many leads and phone calls and letters don’t pan out. I couldn’t reach her, but eventually she called back. I called her, and she cried and cried.” Kevin, surprised that Emery found his mother, was overwhelmed and is working towards meeting her someday.

“With no sense of family, children have no attachments and no resources. Conversely, the more connections a child has, the more successful they are later in life. So we strive to widen the family circle,” said Emery. Statistics confirm that children in foster care who age out of the system, refuse services after reaching the age of emancipation, and who have no family attachments, often end up homeless.

The Family Finding process begins with Emery meeting with the child and his/her social worker to discuss the child's thoughts about family finding and safety concerns. The search then moves to “case mining,” reviewing the case files and court records. The children themselves are a resource in obtaining information on relatives.

The next step is a search through social media and the government database Accurant. Relatives are contacted to explore their willingness to establish a relationship with the child. This engagement phase takes place through phone conversations, letters, emails and in-person interviews. The objective is to identify extended family and close friends to participate in a planning meeting on how to keep the child safely connected to family members and supportive adults. People who would be a negative influence and those who the child does not want contact with are not included.



*Family Finder Emery Jefferies.*

This “Blended Perspective Team,” which includes the child, family members, fictive kin, social workers and attorneys, develops a plan for the child’s long-term connection to family. Follow-up ensures that the child and family are able to maintain the relationship.

One of Emery’s earlier successes involved a young man who was wondering about his grandmother. He was aging out of the foster care system, and a shelter would have been his next

stop. Emery found his grandmother and later his mother and sister in Mississippi, and he is working to locate paternal relatives. “He has a good chance at getting into JobCorps, which will teach him the skills he needs to become employable and independent. Now he has the support of his birth family as he does it.”

Emery has a great love for kids, which fuels the passion for what he does. It takes about six months to work through a case, although as Emery is finding, you are never completely finished.

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website and check out our annual report  
at [alexandriava.gov/dchs](http://alexandriava.gov/dchs)

# Mental Health First Aid

Rachel Miller, a volunteer who runs Sara's Table, the free breakfast program at Washington Street United Methodist Church, had some concerns about the diners she sees. Some of the men and women are long-time homeless with chronic, untreated mental health disorders. She wanted to be welcoming and friendly, but wasn't sure how to engage people who displayed odd behavior. She contacted mental health staff, and fortunately, we had something helpful to offer, training in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA).

Eager to learn about psychiatric issues, Rachel and other Sara's Table volunteers enrolled in the first session of the 12-hour interactive program that teaches people how to identify and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use. By providing overviews of the symptoms of depression, anxiety and psychosis, the training builds an understanding of how these illnesses affect people, describes common treatments, and teaches basic skills for providing help to someone who may be experiencing symptoms.

According to Mike Gilmore, Director of the Department of Community and Human Services, "The Department became interested in MHFA because mental health staff are asked with regularity to respond to community questions and concerns about behavioral health issues, and we did not have in place any formalized prevention or education services for mental health or substance abuse first aid for adults."

The training, Gilmore is quick to point out, does not prepare someone to diagnose mental illnesses or provide therapy. Much like traditional Red Cross First Aid, MHFA is designed to help paraprofessionals and laypersons provide emergency support until an individual can be linked to appropriate resources. Attendees of the full 12-hour course receive a three-year certification in MHFA.

Four DCHS staff have been trained as trainers: Mike Gilmore, Director; Carol Layer, Deputy Director of Adult Services; Michelle Albert, Homeless Services and PATH Coordinator for CSB; and Lesa Gilbert, Community Services Program Coordinator.

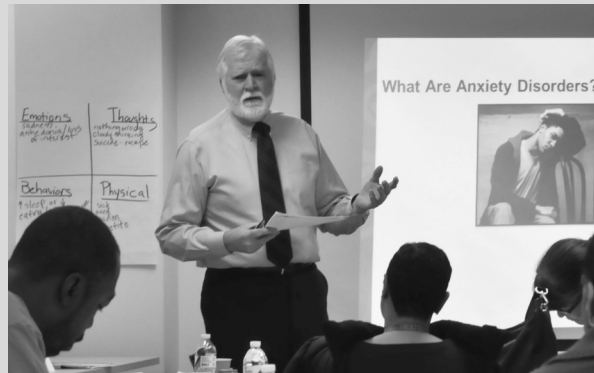
Gilbert and Albert, both of whom work with the homeless population, applaud the course because it provides concrete skills to use in assessing and engaging. "What I love about the curriculum," says Albert, "is no matter what learning style a person has, it's incorporated in the class. The material is very interactive and the information is easy to comprehend."

Gilbert noted that one exercise involves three people. Two are speaking and the third takes the role of the voices in one person's head. The person hearing the voices begins to understand what people who hear voices are dealing with when trying to operate in the world. "People are able to empathize," she added.

At the base of the curriculum is the five-step approach to first aid: Assess for risk of suicide or harm; Listen nonjudgmentally; Give reassurance and information; Encourage appropriate professional help; Encourage self-help and other support strategies.

Studies have shown that those who trained in Mental Health First Aid have greater confidence in providing help to others, greater likelihood of advising people to seek professional help, improved concordance with health professionals about treatments, and decreased stigmatizing attitudes.

So far, the trainings have been offered to staff and volunteers of Alexandria homeless shelters. In the future, the Department hopes to provide training to Alexandria residents, the business and faith communities, school personnel, public safety first responders and private agency partners. For more information, contact Michelle Albert at [michelle.albert@alexandriava.gov](mailto:michelle.albert@alexandriava.gov).



***DCHS Director Mike Gilmore giving a MHFA training, and MHFA trainers Lesa Gilbert and Michelle Albert below.***



# Annual Salute to Women Awards

The Alexandria Commission for Women recognized nine women, one man and four teens at the 33rd Annual Salute to Women Awards Banquet. Proceeds from the event support the Alexandria Sexual Assault Program. The winners and highlights of their accomplishments follow.

**Elsie Mosqueda: The Susan Lowell Butler Lifetime Achievement Award** - For 35 years, Ms. Mosqueda has worked to improve the lives of those in need. For the last two years, she served as the President of the Women's Association of Northern Virginia, leading fundraising efforts to support services to military families, abused children and victims of domestic violence. Elsie participates in the Alexandria Tutoring Consortium, providing tutoring to first grade students. She served as the Director of Bienvenidos, held an integral role in the development of Rebuilding Alexandria Together, served as the Executive Director of Community Partners for Children, and helped form the Alexandria Nonprofit Council. Later, she served as the Community Relations Director for the Northern Virginia AIDS Ministry, among other accomplishments.

**Gwendolyn Hubbard Lewis: The Marguerite Payez Leadership Award** - Ms. Lewis is the Founder and Executive Director of the Concerned Citizens Network of Alexandria (CCNA), a collaborative effort between professionals, the public, faith organizations, and non-profit partners who are committed to closing the minority achievement gap in secondary education. Gwendolyn led the CCNA's efforts to develop the Reach and Rise in Excellence afterschool program that supports science and technology-based enrichment in Alexandria public schools.

**Jane Grayson, M.D.: Women's Health and Safety Advocate Award** -Dr. Grayson is a radiation oncologist. Her dedication to finding a cure for breast cancer was instrumental in helping Inova Alexandria Hospital become a nationally accredited program for breast cancer, establishing clinical trials for breast cancer patients, and helping the hospital become smoke-free.

**Becky Griesse (Adult Category) and Teens Talk Founders (Youth Category)**  
**Emma Beall, Yasmin Faruki, Brooke Ninman and David Summers: Youth Community Services Award** - Ms. Griesse served as coordinator of the Alexandria Campaign on Adolescent Pregnancy (ACAP) from 2007 to 2012. Becky's efforts contributed to a 25% drop of the adolescent pregnancy rate in the City over the past decade. Recently, Becky spearheaded a re-branding campaign for ACAP, known as Keep It 360, that came directly from the vision of teens. T.C. Williams students Emma, Yasmin, Brooke and David served as youth advisors for ACAP. They titled their group "Teens Talk" and worked to develop Keep It 360. The campaign promotes open conversations about sex and teen pregnancy between teens, parents and the community. The group is now an official organization at T.C. Williams.



*Teens Talk founders with Becky Griesse (right).*

**Andrea Seward: Leadership in Business and Career Development Award** - Using her experience as the owner of two businesses - Misha's Coffee and Trident Crossfit - Ms. Seward has served as a mentor to dozens of women in business. Andrea has encouraged women to improve their health and well-being. She has trained and mentored countless Alexandria residents in her coffee shop. Through Trident Crossfit, Andrea created a supportive environment for women and girls to improve their health and fitness. Her Barbells for Boobs fundraiser raised over \$10,000 for breast cancer, and she also held the 31 Heroes Project and Fight Gone Bad to support the Wounded Warrior Foundation.

**Mary Jane Nugent: The Marian Van Landingham Legislation and Public Policy Award** -From 1973-74, Ms. Nugent served as the president of the George Mason PTA, which led her to a position on the Alexandria School Board. She later served on the Virginia School Boards Association and was the president of the local chapter of the League of Women Voters. Mary Jane held positions with the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce and the Office of Voter Registration and has worked for City and state elected officials. She has served as the Secretary of the Friends of Alexandria Archeology and presently is a Council-appointed non-voting member on the Torpedo Factory Arts Board of Directors.

**Patricia Rodgers: Making a Difference Award** -As a volunteer, Ms. Rodgers was the Founding Director of the Northern Virginia AIDS Ministry, the Virginia Oral Health Coalition and the Alexandria Tutoring Consortium. She was a founding member and current co-Chair of the Alexandria Childhood Obesity Action Network. Additionally, she has been active in the Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia (MGNV), where she led plant clinics and organized public education workshops. Her work with MGNV inspired her to initiate a partnership between A-COAN and the Alexandria Redevelopment Housing Authority to create community gardens for children and adult residents of the Ruby Tucker Family Center.

**Fire Captain Rodney Masser: The Vola Lawson Award** -Captain Masser developed a fire department initiative to increase awareness about breast cancer and raise funds to provide preventative care for uninsured Alexandria women. In collaboration with his colleagues, Rodney designed a logo with the theme "Help Alexandria Fire-Rescue Extinguish Breast Cancer," and put the logo on pink t-shirts to be worn by Alexandria firefighters and sold to raise funds. He and his colleagues sold 1,500 t-shirts and raised \$9,000 for the Alexandria Breast Cancer Fund.

**Betty Morrison: Rising Star Award** -As a member of Top Ladies of Distinction, Inc., Ms. Morrison has served as the Sickle Cell Awareness and NAACP Chairs. Her work has had a positive impact on women and girls aged 13-60. Through her service with the Order of Eastern Star, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, the Junior League and Top Ladies of Distinction, she has worked to support voter registration for underrepresented communities, increased community awareness of public policy issues and participated in youth programs.

**Rachel Alberts: Donna Bergheim Cultural Affairs Award** -Ms. Alberts is committed to teaching children about the world through theater. From 1998-2008, Rachel and a group of local teachers developed a unique program to involve more than 300 elementary students in a play written for their entire student body. In 2007, with funding from the Washington Post, Rachel adapted her experience-based approach to develop an after school program entitled "Partners in Education" at Maury and Lyles Crouch Elementary Schools.



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## Alcohol Screening Available On-line

Alcohol is a socially accepted drug, which makes it harder to think of it in terms of the potential dangers it can pose.

As a depressant, alcohol impairs judgment, which can have a variety of negative effects. It may lead to drinking and driving, engaging in unsafe sex, forgetting responsibilities, or exhibiting inappropriate or violent behavior including domestic abuse.

The long-term effects of heavy drinking – alcoholism – can be devastating. Over years of drinking, the body can be seriously damaged, including vital organs like the brain and liver. Alcohol consumption is also tied to depression – it's a handy "crutch" that a person with depression may

lean on but it will ultimately make matters worse.

April is National Alcohol Awareness Month, and we encourage those who drink alcohol to take advantage of an anonymous, alcohol self-assessment. Whether it's you, a family member or a friend, the few minutes it takes to complete the assessment is time well spent. Go to [alexandriava.gov/dchs](http://alexandriava.gov/dchs) to take a free alcohol self-assessment.



To make comments or suggestions for story ideas, or to receive this newsletter by email, contact Jennifer Cohen at 703.746.3484 or [jennifer.cohen@alexandriava.gov](mailto:jennifer.cohen@alexandriava.gov).



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The Alexandria Department of Community and Human Services is comprised of programs from three formerly separate departments: The Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse; Human Services and the Office on Women. While the Alexandria Community Services Board (CSB) will continue oversight of mental health, intellectual disability and substance abuse programs, the CSB newsletter now features programs from across the Department.